

News from the Internet reported that a goat in Belgium dead for two years tested positive for BSE, or "Mad Scientist Disease." I can sure relate to the timing. At the ranch the same week, we found a dead cow in the Middle Pasture south of the headquarters that we'd been hunting for two years, maybe longer.

I have never been to Belgium, but if the cover is thick enough to hide a dead goat for two years, it must be similar to ours. Two hundred of the 1200 acres in the Middle Pasture is in playa lakebeds covered with unturned rocks and thick mesquite brush. Ground cover ranges from coarse-stemmed tabosa and mesquite grasses to wide varieties of weeds toxic to sheep and cattle.

In wet years, greenish-yellow vines loop around the rock outcrops; tall-stemmed flowering plants pop from the loose soil around sinkholes. Riding off in the lakes gives a spooky aura of death winding among dried bones and scattered pieces of wool.

The mineral from decaying woolies and hollow horns' bones has enriched the soil during my tenancy. Perhaps even to the point of over-enriching the soil, like over-fertilizing a field. Might explain why the A&M Research Center at Angelo discovered 20 years ago that the deep-

rooted bitterweed on the 09 Divide was the most toxic in the shortgrass country.

A new difficulty in finding missing animals are the miles of new fences. Nowadays, when we miss a cow, we know she is on us and not on one of the neighbors' ranches. It's up to us to ride, and ride some more, over the same ground to force the truth that the missing animal is our responsibility.

Before all the big fuss over outside fences, there were 100 sections of open range up on the Divide. Not only did a cowboy have to know how to trail a missing cow, he had to keep from getting lost and learn enough diplomacy to cross alien ground without causing trouble.

A spectacular case we once solved was finding a thick rubber glove in the paunch of an expired cow over in the oilfield. Would have been easy to be misled, as her poison of choice was the black plastic lining soaked with completion chemicals in old slush pits. Reason the glove did her in was she'd developed the habit of eating plastic like humans slurp spaghetti. Had she thoroughly chewed the thick glove, chances are she might have weaned her calf before the plastic killed her.

To end the story, the oil operator's lawyer sent a long list of questions about the case. I gave up on the

question of whether the cow had seen a veterinarian. Much as I know about cattle, I can't even imagine who or what they have seen.

Most of us herders do a good job of diagnosing death from lightning storms and common diseases. It's also pretty simple to diagnose the cause of death of a cow lying a few feet off an unfenced public road close to tire marks and broken glass. In spite of the drama attached, we have never knowingly had a cow shot by a hunter.

The worst loss of all time was at the old ranch. Twenty-five or 30 head of young cattle died, either from soil contamination over a pipeline or a huge plastic balloon the Air Force shot down over the Stage Stand Pasture. The case remains unsolved, nor was repayment made by the government or the pipeline company.

Before graybeards declined to the rank of being called senior citizens, grandfathers taught sons and daughters the climatic hazards, the pestilence plagues, the varieties of forages toxic and beneficial, weather signs, drouth feeding practice, how to endure herd quarantines, the right approach to bankers during the life of a quarantine, how to appeal to health authorities, dramatization for government aid both oral and written, creative excuses and alibis for

late payment of bills and taxes, and the ability to combine many of these advantages and disadvantages into one issue.

Nowadays, range experts living in cities provide the service. Grandfathers live retired lives, ignored in the main part.

Lost goat catastrophes in foreign lands and unsolved dead cows in the Middle Pasture sure make me miss the families who used to share life on the Divide. Wish one was around when I ride up on a mysterious death. My stepdad and his father knew the land. Mother listened to so much talk and saw so much living up here, she was sure knowledgeable. In other times, I had cousins and neighbors all around to discuss our problems. Ranching was all that mattered.

It's too late to go to Belgium to help investigate the dead goat. Safe money says, or my hunch is, the doctors are hoping to find BSE. For certain, I don't want scientists messing around the Middle Pasture looking for their favorite disease. Hunters track in enough stuff without having a doctor dead bent on destroying the industry nosing around ...